INTANGIBLES

A Story of Business Life by Frederick Orin Bartlett

THE least important person in the luxurious offices of R. F. Knight & Son of New York city, dealers in oil securities, was, undoubtedly, Miss Nathalie Wadsworth, who operated the multigraphing machine. She did not amount to a hill of beans or a row of pins or anything else of minor consequence, for, although she filled her position capably enough, it was more the machine than she who was of value. Viewed as a net quick asset—a feature R. F. Knight & Son were always obliged to consider in their business—she would not have inventoried as much as a desk.

It can easily be understood, then, that to those accustomed to dealing in enterprises placed on the market in million-share lots, par value $5 a share, Miss Wadsworth looked like a pretty small proposition.

In other ways, however—intangible little ways—Miss Wadsworth showed up to better advantage. Yet no one seemed to appreciate this except Billy Talbot, who represented Knight & Son on the curb and himself everywhere else. And he realized that to refer to Miss Wadsworth's personal attributes as real assets was merely a pretty figure of speech. They were not even substantial enough to be taxed, which is getting assets down to as fine a point as it is possible to get them on this plane. Nor were they easily inventoried.

Studied in detail, Miss Wadsworth was not strikingly beautiful; and yet Talbot, when out of the office, could call her to mind as vividly as though she stood before him, when the most he could ever recall of prettier girls was the fact that they were pretty. Miss Wadsworth never attempted to do anything in particular with her hair, and yet it was difficult to forget the fineness and gloss of it. There was nothing especially significant about her gray eyes except that they were impressively honest, or her straight nose, or her gentle mouth; but she had not been established in that outer office a week before he found himself carrying around in his mind, as in a locket, the picture she made when seated pertly independent before her work.

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SHE was quite as unrelated to this work as the machine she operated—quite unrelated, in fact, to the whole office. Somehow Talbot placed her in a class with the gallery of debutantes who appear in the photogravure section of the better Sunday newspapers. She possessed the same poise, the same direct challenge that meets a man eye to eye, the same superiority to setting or circumstance. Intangibles!

Talbot was not given to that kind of appreciation either. His standard of beauty was based upon the successes of real gardens, where graces were displayed upon the surface and a man was not obliged to guess at much of anything. There was Fifi Collette now featured, who could have had Talbot for the asking and did not ask, perhaps because in the dollar seat which was his limit she could not see him. But, man dear, she had golden hair that took all sorts of marvelous turns, eyes that flashed to the last row of admiring men, color and curves and rustling silks and jewels—all so clearly and definitely displayed that a press agent could catalogue them without effort as exhibit A, exhibit B, exhibit C. So could Talbot, while he observed her on the stage. But after that it was necessary for him to pay another dollar in order to refresh his memory.

This was a decided disadvantage because at this time he did not have many dollars. On the salary of fifty a week he lost pretty consistently one-half of it in optimistic attempts to beat the market. Out of what was left he was obliged to waste something on board and room. The remainder he invested in dress and entertainment. He dressed as well as his means allowed as a matter of personal taste, for he enjoyed good clothes and wore them well. Of medium height and slight, with a thin, nervous face, alert black eyes, a rather tense mouth, he would have been selected in a crowd of a hundred as one of a half dozen men fertile in demanding intelligence, nerve and initiative.

He revealed something of this first quality in being the only one of the numerous young fellows who hustled in and out of the office of Knight & Son to recognize the fact that Miss Wadsworth was not quite the usual young woman employed in the downtown district. He revealed the other two qualities in venturing to speak to her even when he had nothing whatever to do with the business.

He took a chance late one rainy afternoon after Golden Flow, par value $5, which he had bought at 50 cents, slumped to 40, cleaning him out of half a week's salary and leaving him a bit lonesome.

"I hope you didn't read any of those last circulars you sent out on Golden Flow," he observed.

"It never occurs to me to read any of them," Miss Wadsworth replied pleasantly enough. "But why?"

"It would probably have cost you money."

"Hew."

"The stuff slumped ten points today."

"Really?" she answered, with less interest than she would have shown had he informed her it was now raining.

"I ought to have known better myself, but this one sounded so darned good I thought I could get in and get out. Well, I got in all right."

"You mean you lost?"

"I sure did. Our Mr. Knight is now picking the bones."

"I'm sorry you lost," she returned sincerely, which was the last thing in the world Talbot expected her to say. He had not been looking for sympathy, for he was not even pitying himself. A man must take his losses with his gains. On the strength of a tip he had picked up in the last half hour he was already planning a campaign on Gusher—a proposition Knight & Son were just placing on the market. If this well did 10 per cent of the gushing the firm was doing for it, his fortune was, for the twentieth time that year, assured.

"I'm sorry I made you sorry," he answered. "To prove it I'd take you to the movies tonight if you'd go."

"Thank you, but I never go to the movies."

The remark Talbot made to himself was, "Some class!" but out loud he endeavored, as jauntily as possible, to cover up what he felt to have been a bad break. Though he ran the risk of committing himself beyond his resources, he ventured boldly:

"There's a good show at the Roof Garden."

"Really?"

"How'd that suit you?"

"I have an idea it would not suit me at all, but I've never been there."

"Like to try."

"No, thank you."

"Well, what in thunder do you do when you get through work?" he exclaimed, frankly puzzled.

"I go home."

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HE SHOT a swift glance at the fourth finger of her left hand. No ring of any kind was in evidence.

He nodded sympathetically.

"It's hell to be poor. But, believe me, little woman, luck is bound to turn. The old man is planning to splurge on this Gusher proposition and I'm going to climb aboard."

"That's what you did before, isn't it?"

"Right. But this time I'll know when to get off."

"Good luck," she smiled.

Then she turned back to her work in so decided a fashion that it left Talbot nothing to do but to go on about his own affairs. This was always a sufficiently engrossing occupation to keep him thoroughly engaged during business hours. It was not until the curb was closed and he had cleaned up the odds and ends of details around the office that he began to grow restless, began to feel keenly the humiliation of his position in this great city. There was only one thing he needed to have this old town throw open its gates and welcome him like a conquering hero—just money. Give him that—not a picayune little salary, but a real killing that would allow him to stuff his pockets full—and the world was his.

There was nothing to it after that. These rows upon rows of houses that now bordered the streets like barrier walls when he went out upon them at the close of the day's work would then swing open their hospitable doors. Cafes, stores, theaters, homes, which now had posted at their entrances flunkeys to warn him away, would pass the word along to these same flunkeys to greet him with a smile. Gay colors, music, pretty faces, silks and choice foods, entertainers to make him laugh and weep and sigh and keep him on the sharp edge of life, stood waiting upon his success.

"Hurry," they seemed to say. "We are ready. The only passport you need is a bit of gold. Get it quickly and join us."

And with a bit of luck this bit of gold was so easily gotten. He saw it done every day upon the street. He had seen Knight & Son do it a dozen times and helped them do it. The firm was alleged to have made half a million in Golden Flow, and before this had made again and again half-millions. It was as easy as making half-dollars if only a man did it on a big enough scale. He could do it himself once he got a start. He might be doing it within six months if the gusher went well.

Tomorrow—that is what kept Billy Talbot going. The next day might see the golden snowball start rolling down the golden slope, growing in size with each click of the ticker, until finally he gathered it into his waiting arms. Tomorrow is what made it possible for Billy Talbot to edge into a white-tiled automatic lunch that evening and in sepulchral splendor dine at dizzy time on breakfast food; tomorrow is what made it possible for him to hold his head erect when hurrying along Broadway toward his dull room; tomorrow is what made it possible for him to wave his hand in gay greeting as he passed the poster still announcing Mlle. Collette at the Roof Garden. And yet, oddly enough, when he finally reached that room his thoughts switched swiftly to Miss Wadsworth.

"She's probably home by now," he thought. Then below his breath he added, "Poor devil!"

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THERE are those on the street who still talk about the gusher because it did the last thing in the world that Knight & Son expected of it—it gushed. Purely for advertising purposes, and to cover the law, Knight, senior, actually sank a well. Nothing makes a more dramatic picture than a skeleton-like derrick erected beside a small shed, with steam coming from pipes. It might properly be used as an emblem in industry. Knight had these snapshots sprinkled all over the cheaper Sunday papers and on the strength of them boosted the stock from 10 cents—par value, $5, of course—to 40 cents.

Out of a conservative part of these proceeds he kept boring to lend flavor to his daily reports that he was now down so many feet. The stock went to 50. Then one afternoon Knight received a frantic telegram. And somehow Billy Talbot got wind of that telegram. What he did in the next hour is remembered by those who perhaps have forgotten the gusher. For on the strength of what he made in the next two days, as the stock sky-rocketed to $10, the press seized upon him and created for the entertainment of their readers one of those eternally fascinating characters, "The Boy Broker," or, as others chose to entitle him, "The Boy Plunger."

His winnings were variously estimated to be from one million to five, and his picture was taken both entering and leaving the offices of Knight & Son. Young woman reporters described him as both daring and handsome—which within certain limits was true enough.

As a matter of fact, when Billy Talbot finally escaped from the bedlam which for forty-eight hours had surrounded him on the curb and in his hectic sleep, and found it possible to collect his thoughts sufficiently to do problems in simple addition and subtraction, he learned that he was worth, minus the odds and ends of a few hundreds, some $300,000. Which was not so bad considering the fact he had started with only $100 and his nerve.

Three hundred thousand dollars in cold cash—for before he quit he turned in the last scrap of paper he possessed. Here is where he showed still more nerve, for Gusher was still going strong. Down there by the well the heavy yellow fluid was oozing all over the ground, while in the offices of Knight & Son the heavy yellow metal was oozing all over the floor.

It was a curious spectacle, and no one in a detached way enjoyed it more than Miss Wadsworth. She had a good deal of spare time at this point, for her branch of the work ceased almost entirely. She watched the excited traders hurrying in and out, listened to the babel of frantic voices, and noted the disheveled appearance of wild-eyed Billy Talbot. It was she who, on the impulse of the moment, caught his arm once as he was bolting past her and said in her low even voice:

"Keep your head, Mr. Talbot."

Billy stared at her as at some being from another world.

"I've got it this time," he exclaimed in a voice grown husky from shouting.

"Don't let it get you," she warned steadily.

He was off again, but somehow her words stuck in the back of his head. He heard them at the moment the stock crossed ten, and he was tempted to hold on for fifteen. He had set ten as his limit, but with things moving as fast as they were fifteen looked certain. Every point meant $30,000. That was a lot of money—easy money. But he sold. And after the last sale he resigned from his job.

IN ORDER WAYS, HOWEVER—INTANGIBLE LITTLE WAYS—MISS WADSWORTH SHOWED UP TO BETTER ADVANTAGE. YET NO ONE SEEMED TO APPRECIATE THIS EXCEPT BILLY TALBOT.

He expectantly a large public was waiting to see him put some of these into execution. It was not until he came down to breakfast that this new phase of success was called to his attention by an eager young reporter intent upon a Sunday special. Barney had been waiting around ever since 7 that morning, and it was now 10. The hotel clerk pointed out Talbot as soon as he appeared, and Barney stopped him as he was entering the dining room.

"I want to get a story of your first day as a millionaire," explained Barney. "I'm assigned to follow you until you turn in tonight."

"You are, are you?" snapped Talbot. "Well, just cut it out, will you?"

"I can't do that, Mr. Talbot. You're a public character now."

"I don't know how you figure that. If it's advertising dope you're after, I'm out of Gusher."

"Planning a campaign on something else?"

"You betcha; on breakfast," answered Talbot. "I'm through with the market."

"You must have hit it right. I'll hang around until you've eaten. I want to get a line on what you order."

Talbot sidled away; but evidently the word had been passed around, for he found the head waiter addressing him by name and solicitously consulting his taste in the matter of tables.

"Anywhere out of sight of that hawk of a newspaper man," said Talbot.

He was given his choice of corner tables and selected the nearest. And here for the next hour he thoroughly enjoyed himself. He was hungry, his time was his own and he chose from the menu thoughtfully and at will, with not the slightest respect for the tiny adjacent figures that heretofore had always governed his taste and curbed his appetite. He had that morning some $300,000 on deposit with the Knickerbocker Trust. When he had time to invest in Libertys, as he intended, he would have an income of around $12,000 a year—a thousand dollars a month. Not an extravagant sum, but more than enough to allow him full indulgence in the matter of meals. If not, then he could draw on his principal. He did not intend to be held in bondage by that. He did not intend to be held in bondage by anything. He meant to use this money—all of it—as he chose; to test to the limit the best that life contained.

That was his mood this morning, but, even so, he was surprised at how little headway he made in this his first venture.

After his grapefruit, a bit of tenderloin, his coffee and rolls, he was through. The bill, everything considered, was not so much, and less than a full hour had been consumed. Barney was waiting for him.

"Enjoy it?" inquired the reporter.

"You bet. You're the only little fly in the ointment I've found so far. Cut it out, will you?"

"Oh, don't mind me."

"Very well, I won't," answered Talbot.

Which is quite the wisest stand he could have taken. It was not long before the press dropped him. After it had described what he ate, what he wore, and his new quarters at the Barchester, into which he moved almost immediately, they were practically done with him. For a little while longer they kept half an eye out, hopefully, but nothing sensational developed, and they finally dropped him altogether—dropped him as they so often do, at the very point where his life began to get interesting.

If Barney had only known it, the tip to have followed up was Miss Wadsworth, and yet he might not have got very far with it at that. As a matter of fact, Talbot himself did not. She was too much of an intangible.

It was at the end of his first week at the Barchester that she came bobbing back into Talbot's thoughts. That had been a wonderful week—a soul-satisfying week. If the press had only been able to get below that beautifully tailored exterior of his to the center that registers sensations, it would have had material enough. That is the kind of reporting that counts. But Talbot was his own reporter and own public—for at least seven days. Relaxing, he gave himself up utterly to the sheer luxury of indulging to capacity his five senses.

His only limit was the limit of pleasurable reaction he was able to secure. This of course cut him off from a lot of rough stuff because he hasn't the digestion of a goat, and from many things because they didn't appeal to him. This at once ruled out the cabaret, which he considered a vulgar imitation of the real thing. He had been to the Roof Garden, and that was enough. He had been to the opera, and that was enough. He had been to the theater, and that was enough. He had been to the movies, and that was enough. He had been to the prize fights, and that was enough. He had been to the six-day bicycle race, and that was enough. He had been to the automobile show, and that was enough. He had been to the horse show, and that was enough. He had been to the dog show, and that was enough. He had been to the flower show, and that was enough. He had been to the poultry show, and that was enough. He had been to the cat show, and that was enough. He had been to the rabbit show, and that was enough. He had been to the pigeon show, and that was enough. He had been to the bird show, and that was enough. He had been to the fish show, and that was enough. He had been to the bench show